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ABSTRACT

This review of social problem novels for young adults opens with a brief background of the genre, then lists the dominant themes of social problem fiction and nonfiction novels that have been published in the last two years, such as alcoholism, alienation, death, growing up and self-awarness, drugs, and divorce. Other themes mentioned are runaways, suicide, child abuse, adopted teenagers searching for real parents, teenagers in love with older people, rape, and anorexia nervosa. The paper concludes with the some observations about the novels, including the continued prevalence of established authors and the maturing of the social problem novel in scope and content. Eight criteria for including a novel on a recommended book list are provided. (AEA)

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CURRENT SOCIAL PROBLEM NOVELS

Donald J. Kenney

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CURRENT SOCIAL PROBLEM NOVELS by Donald J. Kenney

A large proportion of young adult novels published today deal with themes of alcoholism, drug abuse, coping with divorced parents, unplanned pregnancy, and family or peer group relations. These novels are among the most popular reading of young adults. These novels are usually referred to as "problem novels", "social issue" or "social problem" novels.

The history, or exact date of emergence, of this type of novel cannot exactly be pinpointed. However, its popularity and dominance certainly could be established in the mid-60's with the advent of the drug scene and the rebellion against parental and societal standards. In 1967 S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders appeared and established a landmark in young adult fiction. Ann Head's Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones and Jean Thompson's House of Tomorrow also appeared and helped set the tone of social problem novels. Others followed such as Paul Zindel's The Pigman (1968), Richard Bradford's Red Sky at Morning, and John Donovan's I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip.

What are the social problem novels of the 80's like? I have reviewed 379 personal and social problem books thus far which is 11.07 percent of the total books received for review. Eighty-nine books in this category have been accepted for the 1981 edition of Books For You; 147 books were rejected in this category. I have retained 21 titles from the old edition of Books For You. The "Problems: Personal and Social" books represent a large number of the books being considered for this new edition of Books For You. Many of the same themes of the 60's and 70's are still actively discussed in novels today -- pre-marital sex, unplanned pregnancy, drugs, and alienation. However, the list has grown over the years. Perennial topics creep in each year.

In the last two years, the dominant themes of fictional books on social problems are:

Alcoholism
Physical and Mental Handicaps
Aging
Alienation from - Parents & Family
- Peers
- Society
Death
Teenage Pregnancy
Growing Up & Self-Awareness
Coping with Divorce
Drugs
Homosexuality

Many of the same themes parallel non-fiction books. Those dominant themes for non-fiction books include:

Human Rights
Drugs
Divorce
Death
Alcoholism
Rights of Teenagers

In examining these themes, there are several observations about the individual themes that are worth noting. But first, as you well know, categorizing a novel into a single theme category is not easy nor always possible. How does Betty Greene's Summer of My German Soldier work into problem categories. Is it a growing-up, self-awareness novel; child abuse?

Is A Star for the Latecomer by Bonnie and Paul Zindel about coping with death or the realization that everyone has to make his or her own decisions about the future regardless of parental pressures. Well, so much about the problems of categorizing the novels.

Dominant Themes in Social Problem Books

Although drug books have not entirely disappeared, alcoholsim as a theme has replaced this type of problem book. Teenagers coping with alcoholism as in Sandra Scoppettone's novel, The Late Great Me and Linnea Due's High and Outside, as well as teenagers coping with parents or relatives with drinking problems is a common topic of problem novels in the last couple of years. As I mentioned previously, drug related books have not entirely disappeared and the best example of the new ones on this topic is Todd Strasser's Angel Blue Dust. Novels dealing with physical and mental handicaps have been numerous. Sue Ellen Bridgers, All Together Now and Edwin Francis Kaplan's No Other Love are two good examples. Numerous novels deal with individuals coming to grips with their own handicaps and characters coping with handicapped brothers and sisters such as Marlene Shyer's Welcome Home Jelly-Bean.

Parent-child relationships has been a recurring theme in literature and is particularly dominant in young adult literature. However, there is an unusual twist to the theme in many young adult novels--parents are often the problem rather than the teenager. There's child abuse in Charlotte Culin's Cages of Glass, Flowers of Time; domineering, selfish mother in A Star for the Latecomer; and numerous novels dealing with alcoholic parents such as N. B. Dorman's Laughter in the Background and Elizabeth Winthrop's Knock, Knock, Who's There?

Observations about Dominant Themes

Among the other themes that I am finding are novels dealing with runaways, suicide, child abuse, adopted teenagers searching for real parents, teenagers in love with older people, rape, and the latest disease phenomenon, anorexia nervosa.

The established authors still dominant the problem category-- Judy Blume, Norma Klein, Barbara Corcoran, Jeanette Eyerly, Norma Johnston, M. E. Kerr, Susan Beth Pfeffer, Sandra Scoppettone, Mary Stolz, Paul Zindel, Lynn Hall, Richard Pck, Blossom Elfman. Three new outstanding authors who have joined the young adult ranks are Terry Davis (Vision Quest), Ouida Sebestyer (Far From Home) and Sue Ellen Bridgers (All Together Now).

The social problem novel has matured since the last decade and has reached out to encompass numerous problems. Of those books accepted, only four carry a warning about language (either I have become more liberal or authors have become more conservative). Criteria for selection include:

1) well-written, with developed, believable characters

2) diverse topics within the category, good representation of each problem

3) length suitable for young adult reader -- some semi-adult books too long

4) balance of fiction and non-fiction although more fiction is representative of the reading in this area than non-fiction

5) balance of authors - particularly well-established, traditional authors of this type of book like Judy Blume, Norma Klein, and Richard Peck

6) balance of books to appeal to both girls and boys

7) short books, for reluctant readers -- too elementary for example did not accept Betsy Byars Night Swimmers; Judy Blume's Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself; Paul Zindel's Confessions of a Teenage Baboon

8) Discovery of new authors and books

I have accepted only those books that will make an overall contribution to the reading of young adults in this thematic area.

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